

JOURNAL OF THE SENATE
ONE HUNDRED SECOND GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE
STATE OF MISSOURI
FIRST REGULAR SESSION

FIRST DAY - WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 4, 2023

President Pro Tem Rowden assumed the dais and delivered the following address:

Opening Address

Senator Caleb Rowden, President Pro Tem
First Regular Session, 102nd General Assembly
January 4, 2023

First of all, thank you to my colleagues for entrusting me with the tremendous opportunity and responsibility of becoming the 83rd President Pro-Tem of the Missouri Senate. What an incredible honor this is, and one I accept with humility and gratitude.

I want to acknowledge some folks that are here with me today. First of all, my wife Aubrey and our three kids - Willem, Adele & Theo. They have been unbelievably supportive of me throughout my entire political career, and if you follow my social media accounts, you know how much fun I have with these awesome kiddos. Of all the titles I've had in my life, there isn't one that gets anywhere close to "dad."

My mom and dad as well as Aubrey's mom and dad are here today. I am who I am because of the Godly upbringing and unconditional love that my parents gave me, and there is no doubt I wouldn't be here today without both them and my in-laws and all their hard work and dedication to Aubrey and I and our kids.

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And I want to say thank you to all my staff members throughout my time in the House and Senate that have helped me serve my constituents and the people of this great state!

The Missouri Senate is an incredible place. 34 uniquely different individuals representing 34 uniquely different parts of this state. Among the Senators sitting in front of me, we have educators, attorneys, business owners, farmers, and everything in between.

22 men and 12 women.

Some with beautiful heads of hair and some with no hair at all.

This is an incredible place — the history and tradition of this hallowed chamber and men and women who have gone before us have helped set the stage for the moment we find ourselves in today. Being sworn in as members of this Missouri Senate for the 102nd General Assembly.

My path to this moment has been an interesting one, as many of you know. A Christian singer/songwriter turned unlikely State Representative turned unlikely State Senator.

For the many in this building who have interacted with me over my ten years in the legislature, you'll know I am careful not to shove my faith in anyone's face. But as I stand here today, I am more convinced than ever that each of us are here for a reason. This moment is not a mistake. My ascension to this position is not a coincidence. We have a purpose.

Words from the prophet Jeremiah — "For I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Senators, the challenge before us this year and in the years to come undoubtedly has political elements and realities. But there is unquestionably a divine element to our existence here. A pre-ordination of hundreds, if not thousands of events that have led the 34 of us to this moment.

The weight of six million Missourians is on our shoulders. How will we respond? How will we lead?

Over the last six years since I joined the Senate, I am incredibly proud of the many things we have accomplished.

This body has stood up to protect innocent life at every stage of existence.

This body has stood strong to protect constitutional rights and individual liberties in the face of a growing desire by some to trample those liberties.

This body has made it easier to vote and easier to ensure those votes are legitimate.

This body has made generational investments in our state's infrastructure while simultaneously making generational investments in our state's people.

And among many other things, this body for the first time in decades, gave parents and their children opportunities to attain the education they deserve, not just the one defined for them by their zip code and bank balance.

But our work is nowhere near done.

Missouri is undoubtedly a pro-life state. But I think it's important for those of us who call ourselves pro-life in this chamber to recognize what exactly that means, and maybe even work to redefine and broaden the term itself.

That's why I will make it a priority of mine this year to pass Senator Gannon's legislation to extend health care coverage for moms after the birth of their child. Being pro-life means standing strong for kids and their moms.

I will also make it a priority to pass legislation from Senator Coleman that will ensure working Missourians who push to gain economic independence don't have important benefits pulled out from underneath them. Being pro-life means standing strong for Missouri's vulnerable populations.

And it will be my personal priority over the next two years to make it easier and cheaper to move through the adoption process in the state of Missouri. Men and women who seek to adopt in our state shouldn't be butted out by too high a price tag or too many barriers to entry, put up largely by their government.

Being pro-life is valuing kids, from the earliest moments of their development throughout their formative years, especially in our education system.

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It is no secret that I consider myself an “education reformer.” I believe we should provide every opportunity possible for parents to put their kids in a position to achieve success. One of the amazingly frustrating things about that position in the eyes of some in this building is that, somehow, being pro-parent means anti-public education.

Nothing could be further from the truth. And it’s important for us to recognize that very few people view education outside of this building the way we view it inside this building.

Over the next two years, we are going to work hard and work together to redefine what success looks like for schools in this state. For too long, we have let the labels of “establishment” and “reformer” take precedent over serious and increasingly urgent policy discussions about how we define success for schools in this state. We have not done enough. DESE has not done enough. We have been coasting, and our students have been suffering. That must end.

Over the next two years, with the help of many of you, including Senator Koenig, Senator Arthur and Senator Eslinger, we are going to reimagine and lay the groundwork for implementation of a new blueprint for achieving success in our public education system. We will no longer turn our heads while half or more of our kids graduate high school with a 4th graders reading ability and the ability to do math like a 6th grader.

In Missouri, world-class schools should be treated and funded like world-class schools. World-class teachers should be paid like world-class teachers.

We can no longer insist on a one-size-fits-all method of defining success for our schools to cover up for underperforming buildings and districts. We cannot continue to cover up failure. We must instead redefine and reward excellence in our schools.

Missourians are common-sense folks with an independent streak...and as a Republican from Columbia, I may recognize and appreciate that reality as much as anyone here. Missourians have sent veto-proof majorities of Republicans to the House and the Senate for more than a decade now, but they have also implemented a number of policies through the initiative process championed and cheered for by those on the political left. Through this process, our constitution has been inundated with words and policies about bingo and marijuana that belong in our statute books and not in our state’s guiding document.

We will make it a priority of this Senate to raise the bar for entrance into our constitution. While I have no desire to make it harder for citizens to have a voice through the initiative process through increased and unnecessary hurdles to jump over, I simply and firmly believe that the threshold for adding or changing our Constitution should be higher than a simple majority. In looking backward, if this threshold would have been in place, some policies championed by Republicans and others by Democrats that passed would have failed, and some would have passed. For me, this isn’t political...it is just common sense.

Over the next two years, it is my hope that we as a body will spend less time trying to convince Missourians what they should care about and more time listening and understanding what they actually do care about. This job is not about us. It is about the people who sent us here.

On March 2, 1955, a young black woman was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in Alabama. Civil rights leaders and the ACLU rushed to her side and began the process of making her the face and symbol of segregation in the south. Her name was Claudette Colvin. However, as an unmarried and pregnant 15 year old, civil rights leaders and the ACLU decide Colvin wasn’t to be their standard-bearer in the fight against segregation. Eight months later, Rosa Parks happens, but during those eight months, a brilliant and charismatic young minister gets the attention of the community and is chosen to lead the bus boycotts. If Claudette Colvin doesn’t get pregnant and the movement doesn’t wait for eight months, Martin Luther King Jr is a preacher from Alabama that you have never heard of.

Senators — things happen for a reason. There is a plan and a purpose for our existence in this moment and in this season. We must do everything in our power to meet the challenge of this moment.

That means we care more about the policy than we do the personality.

That means we work toward retiring revenge, and not recycling it.

And that means we must break the cycle of governing by fear and half truths.

We are part of something bigger than ourselves here in the Missouri Senate. Each individual Senator has tremendous power, but that power is so much more valuable for the people of Missouri if it is harnessed together.

There will be days where we agree. There will be days when we disagree.

There will be days when we laugh, and some when we cry.

But each of those days is a gift, and one that we must not take for granted.

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Dr. King famously said “There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”

Those words undoubtedly were motivated and guided by the words we find in the book of Micah — “the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

The 34 of us have the potential to do generational good. To make the world better for the next generation of Missourians. The decisions that get us there may not always be the politically expedient ones, but they will always be the right ones.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for the chance to serve you and the people of the Show-Me State in this way.

God bless you, and God bless the great state of Missouri.